

# **Japanese–German Relations, 1895–1945**

War, diplomacy and public opinion

**Edited by Christian W. Spang and  
Rolf-Harald Wippich**

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# Japanese–German Relations, 1895–1945

*Japanese–German Relations, 1895–1945* provides an original and stimulating interpretation of Japanese–German history and international diplomacy. The book offers a deeper understanding of many important aspects of the bilateral relations between the two countries from the Sino–Japanese War in 1894–5 to the parallel defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II.

The book presents new research on the military as well as the ideological side of Japanese–German relations during the crucial half-century preceding 1945. Focusing on ‘War, Diplomacy and Public Opinion’, the book shows convincingly that there is no ‘natural’ link between early German influence on Meiji Japan and the fatal war-alliance.

Written by a team of Japanese and German scholars, this book will be of great interest to those dealing with Japanese and German studies, comparative or world history, international relations and political science alike.

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# Preface

At the *Asian Studies Conference Japan* (ASCJ) in Tokyo in 2001, C.W. Spang organized and chaired a panel on *Diplomacy, War and Public Opinion: Japanese–German Relations, 1895–1945*. Apart from the organizer, S. Saaler, G. Schepers and R.-H. Wippich presented papers, while N. Tajima was a discussant. The panel was attended by an unexpected large number of international scholars, most of whom expressed a great deal of interest in the subject. Considering the crucial role that Germany and Japan played during the first half of the twentieth century, a thorough understanding of their relations in the historical context is significant for anyone interested in the developments leading to both World Wars.

What is often heard is the complaint that it is difficult to find relevant information on the topic of Japanese–German relations in English – information that should be easily accessible to both teachers and students. With this in mind, the editors believe that there is an information gap regarding the historical dimension of Japanese–German relations within the international academic community. This often leads to misinterpreting Prusso–Germany’s intellectual and military influence on Meiji Japan as the starting point of a continuous and logical development that reached its climax in the wartime co-operation of the 1940s. It is one of the goals of this book to show that such a perception is too simple and too one-dimensional.

This volume brings together an unprecedented number of German and Japanese scholars, who are all experts in their related fields. In addition to the articles written by the editors, it contains contributions by three Japanese and five German scholars. All authors have published numerous articles and books in German or Japanese, but few have done so in English. Therefore, this volume makes some of the most recent research on Japanese–German relations available to an international audience.

In selecting contributors and topics, the editors made every effort to present as coherent a picture as possible on the subject. The opinions of the authors remained untouched though. The Introduction draws a broad picture of bilateral contacts, thus providing the historical context in which the subsequent articles can be better understood. The individual contribu-

tions contained in this book highlight some of the most significant topics in the ups and downs of Japanese–German relations between 1895 and 1945.

**Editors' note**

Japanese words are rendered by the standard Hepburn romanization. Japanese names are given in the Japanese order, i.e. family names precede given names.

Christian W. Spang  
Rolf-Harald Wippich  
Tokyo, December 2005

# Abbreviations

ADAP	Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945
BA	Bundesarchiv (Berlin and Koblenz); <i>German Federal Archives</i>
BA-MA	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg; <i>Military Archives</i>
CINC	Commander-in-Chief
Comintern	Communist International
DJG	Deutsch–Japanische Gesellschaft; <i>German–Japanese Society</i>
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
GP	Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette
HStA-IV	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv München, Abteilung IV Kriegsarchiv; <i>Bavarian State Archives, War Archive</i>
IfZ	Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich; <i>Institute for Contemporary History</i>
IMTFE	International Military Tribunal for the Far East
IRAA	Imperial Rule Assistance Association ( <i>Taisei Yokusankai</i> )
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands; <i>German Communist Party</i>
KTB	Kriegstagebuch; <i>war diary</i>
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party of Japan; <i>Jimintō</i>
LMU	Ludwigs-Maximilians University Munich
NARA	National Archives and Record Administration Washington, D.C.
NHK	Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai; <i>Japan Broadcasting Corporation</i>
NKVD	People's Committee of Domestic Matters in the USSR
NL	Nachlass; <i>personal papers</i>
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei; <i>German National Socialist Party</i>
OAG	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, Tokyo; <i>German East Asiatic Society</i>
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht; <i>High Command of the German Armed Forces</i>
PAAA	Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes Berlin; <i>Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office</i>

SkI	Seekriegsleitung; <i>Naval War Staff</i>
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands; <i>German Social Democratic Party</i>
SS	Schutz-Staffel; <i>lit. protective echelons of the NSDAP</i>
TMWC	Trial of the Major War Criminals Nuremberg
ZfG	Zeitschrift für Geopolitik; <i>Journal for Geopolitics</i>



# 1 Introduction – from ‘German Measles’ to ‘Honorary Aryans’

An overview of Japanese–German relations until 1945

*Christian W. Spang and Rolf-Harald Wippich*

Official contacts between Japan and Germany date back to 1861 when a Prussian expedition under Count Friedrich zu Eulenburg concluded the first bilateral treaty. The Prusso–Japanese treaty of 24 January 1861 resembled previous unequal treaties, which the Shogunate had been forced to conclude with Western powers after the opening of the country in 1853–4. It remained in force with only minor modifications until 1899 when the unequal treaties in Japan ceased to exist.<sup>1</sup>

After the establishment of diplomatic relations, Prussia pursued a low-key policy, which reflected both its focus on European affairs as well as its minor interests in Japan. Prussia had no political ambitions in East Asia, but was only interested in economic relations. For that very reason a policy that embraced co-operation with the Western powers and dismissed independent action was most welcome. After the war against France, 1870–1, and the foundation of the *Reich*, Germany continued its passive attitude towards Japan. Chancellor Bismarck concentrated on European politics and abstained from an active policy overseas. Throughout the 1870s, friendly diplomatic representation within the context of the solidarity of Western nations represented the yardstick for Germany’s policy towards Meiji Japan.

In spite of Berlin’s diplomatic hesitancy, Germany began to become attractive as an advanced workshop for Japan’s modernization. In 1872 the first two German *oyatoi gaikokujin* (foreign experts hired by the Meiji government) were employed at the Tokyo Medical School (*igakujo*), Dr Müller and Dr Hoffmann. These two medical officers did invaluable pioneering work with regard to the future employment of German scholars and experts in various fields. Above all, both physicians provided the Japanese with a good model of academic expertise and erudition and helped to establish the outstanding reputation of German medicine in Japan until 1945.

Though Germany continued to exercise political restraint, by the end of the 1870s the idea of taking Germany as a model for modernization was

gaining ground among Japan's ruling elite. The turning point came after Japan had tried and tested various foreign patterns, and a new direction of the modernization process was about to set in as a consequence of the Iwakura Mission to the West (1871–3).<sup>2</sup>

From around 1880 onwards, a noticeable shift away from those countries that previously had been considered role models for Japan's modernization, such as Britain, France and the USA, towards Germany was beginning to emerge. The period of German prominence in Japan's modernization peaked in the 1880s and early 1890s. Germany's popularity as preceptor of modern Japan was supported by the 'Society for German Science' (*Doitsu Gaku Kyōkai*), which had been founded in 1882 by prominent pro-German Japanese academics and politicians. In such fields as education, military, law and science the German influence prevailed and German experts were hired continuously, so that to contemporary observers Meiji Japan looked like it was suffering from 'German measles' (Riess 1917: 203). In particular, the strong military connections proved to be a solid pillar of the 'fatal' Japanese–German friendship after World War I. Friendly relations reached a climax with the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution on 11 February 1889, which was drafted along Prussian lines (Andō 2000).

After about a decade of amicable contacts, great power politics began to take a heavy toll on Japanese–German closeness. It was the Sino–Japanese War of 1894–5 that marked the watershed in the relations between Berlin and Tokyo. The war promoted Japan's international military standing and caused concerns in the West about a confrontation with the new aggressive rival who destabilized the traditional China-based equilibrium in East Asia. After victorious Japan had signed the peace treaty with China in Shimonoseki (17 April 1895), Russia, France and Germany launched a diplomatic protest in Tokyo (23 April 1895) to demand the retrocession of Japan's territorial acquisition in continental China (the Liaodong Peninsula including Port Arthur), which was regarded as a permanent threat to China and to peace in the Far East.

Germany had joined the Triple Intervention exclusively for European reasons; it was interested in a rapprochement with Tsarist Russia whereby its political and strategic position in Europe would be improved considerably. For the German government good relations with their Eastern neighbour were by far more significant than maintaining amicable contacts with Japan. R.-H. Wippich's contribution, however, illustrates another facet of Germany's reaction to the East Asian war. He discusses the enthusiasm for Japan among ordinary Germans as articulated in letters of congratulation to the Japanese Ministry of War.

The Triple Intervention abruptly ended the close relationship between Berlin and Tokyo and led to bitterness and disillusionment on the Japanese side. The Japanese reaction was all the more understandable as the

Kaiser had thought it necessary to strengthen German–Russian co-operation in the Far East by mobilizing the spectre of the ‘Yellow Peril’ and by referring the Tsar to his ‘real’ mission: to be at the ready in the East against the Japanese.<sup>3</sup> Nothing perhaps was more harmful to Japanese–German relations than the Kaiser’s irresponsible agitation of the ‘Yellow Peril’. A. Iikura in his related article gives ample proof of the catastrophic effect of that discriminatory slogan on Japanese–German relations until 1914.

The negative image that the ‘Yellow Peril’ evoked was miles apart from the way Japan was perceived at about the same time by German writers and intellectuals. In his contribution, G. Schepers explains that these literary images of the early twentieth century revolved around ‘exotic’ fantasies, which depicted Japan as a fairy-tale land full of mysteries and wonders. It is remarkable that some of these images and stereotypes have survived to this day.

The year 1897 marked the birth of *Weltpolitik*, a new stage in Germany’s imperialist expansion overseas, which held further dangers for an engagement in the Far East. When Germany’s seizure of Kiao-Chow Bay in November of that year gave the signal for the partition of China, a further rift was added to the already strained Japanese–German relations. Germany’s move triggered the race for spheres of interest in China and threatened Japan’s aspirations there.

Despite growing alienation between Germany and Japan after 1895, the Berlin government was firmly convinced that Germany’s international position had remarkably improved owing to Russia’s preoccupation with Japan in the Far East. What amounted to growing tensions between St Petersburg and Tokyo, particularly after the Russians had taken Port Arthur in 1898, brought Germany relief from Tsarist pressure on its eastern borders. Seen from that perspective, Japan played an important role in Germany’s political calculations: by absorbing all of Russia’s energy, it contributed to the *Reich*’s (alleged) freedom of action around the turn of the century.

Japan’s concerns about Russian aggression were confirmed after the suppression of the Boxer Uprising in China in 1900 when Russia occupied Manchuria and refused to withdraw its troops completely. The growing antagonism between St Petersburg and Tokyo before long led to the conclusion of the Anglo–Japanese alliance on 30 January 1902. This powerful new combination was welcomed in Berlin as a means to further inflame the conflict in East Asia. When Russia finally turned down Japan’s offer of a bargain acknowledging mutual spheres of interest in the Far East, Japan broke off relations and replied by attacking the Russian naval base at Port Arthur on 9 February 1904.

The escalation of Russo–Japanese tensions had not been overlooked in Berlin. On the contrary, Germany did everything to make this duel happen. It even assured Japan of its disinterest in Korea and encouraged

the island power to take the initiative against its rival. The Russo–Japanese war was seen as a welcome opportunity to keep Tsarist Russia busy in East Asia. Even if Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bülow were convinced that Russia would finally defeat Japan, they hoped that as a consequence of a war of attrition Russia would considerably be weakened in its military capacity and therefore no longer represent a menacing factor in the years ahead.

Throughout the war, Japan followed German policy with apprehension, because Germany remained officially neutral without announcing its neutrality. In addition, the sympathies of the German government seemed to be more with Russia since it supplied coal to the Baltic Fleet on its way to East Asia. More important, however, was that Wilhelm II fiercely reactivated his role as the chief propagandist of the ‘Yellow Peril’, which soon reached unknown heights of agitation and intensity. As the political interests of Berlin and Tokyo were basically incompatible, all efforts to improve the somewhat strained Japanese–German relations failed. To maintain that low-profile orientation, individual pro-German politicians, such as Aoki Shūzō or Katsura Tarō, who even had the Kaiser’s confidence, were considered to be of the utmost importance to bilateral contacts in Berlin notwithstanding the poor prospects for success of such a scheme.

It was during the early twentieth century that a thorough readjustment of the international system took place. The first step in that direction had been the Anglo–Japanese alliance in 1902. What came as a real shock to Germany was that in spring 1904 Great Britain and France reached a settlement of their colonial disputes in the *Entente Cordiale* and moved closer together politically. Germany reacted to this challenge by attempting to form an alliance with Russia, but its advances ended in failure. Another attempt was to exert pressure on Russia’s ally France in the First Moroccan Crisis of 1905–6 to undermine the Anglo–French rapprochement. This plan not only went entirely wrong, but it also increased Anglo–German tensions which had already been burdened with Germany’s large-scale naval construction programme since 1898.

By the end of the Russo–Japanese war Germany’s international position had dramatically deteriorated despite the fact that from 1904–5 onwards Germany sought a certain level of political and economic co-operation with the USA. Both powers were strong supporters of the ‘Open Door’ policy in East Asia against the advocates of a more restrictive course, such as Russia and Japan. In subsequent years, Germany’s interest in that region was absorbed by the growing US–Japanese conflict which was considered a welcome opportunity to deflect attention from its own problems. These tensions offered the Kaiser, above all, new opportunities to spread his ‘Yellow Peril’ idea (Stingl 1978: 766–71; Mehnert 1995).

When in 1907, England and Russia finally settled their colonial rivalries

and also Japan moved closer to Russia and France, the concept of ‘encirclement’ gained momentum in Berlin. It was then that Wilhelm II thought about creating a counter-league against the existing triple formation of Britain, Russia and France, which was to comprise Germany, Japan and the United States. In many respects, such a grandiose scheme represents the key to understanding Germany’s pre-war Japan policy. In the context of Germany’s *Weltpolitik* the island empire was at best granted a secondary position. Accordingly, in the Kaiser’s ‘counter-league’ project, Japan was to be instrumentalized as a temporary tool in international politics. It was only too obvious that Wilhelm’s concept was not in tune with political realities. Neither Japan nor the USA would have been willing to join the proposed league as it conflicted either with the Anglo–Japanese Alliance or the doctrine of isolation. Moreover, while the monarch argued in favour of an active role in East Asia, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and the Foreign Office emphasized the need for German passivity, as an active exposure in the Far East would only have resulted in a further estrangement from Russia.

Much more pressing than the Kaiser’s fantastic concept of alignment was the need for mere normalization of relations with Tokyo. A good opportunity for that seemed to arise at the end of 1910 when the negotiations for the renewal of the Anglo–Japanese Alliance met with unexpected difficulties. Considering, however, Germany’s overall focus on Europe and its restraint in East Asian affairs, a real chance to reach even a minimal understanding to break down mutual mistrust between Berlin and Tokyo was not in sight. The German policy towards Japan during the closing years of the Meiji era was largely confined to support for the pro-German press in Japan against the dominance of British-controlled foreign media and to a discreet attempt to turn the tides of negative sentiments against Germany. With these efforts, however, Germany was not very successful (GP 32, 12015 and 12018).

In summer of 1912, an opportunity for a thorough overhaul of bilateral relations seemed to arise when Katsura Tarō, on a trip to Europe, sounded out the possibility of talks with Germany.<sup>4</sup> The influential pro-German Meiji politician could have been a valuable ally for improving mutual understanding, yet such a prospect was not to materialize. Upon arrival in St Petersburg, Katsura was called back to Japan due to the Meiji emperor’s failing health. When the Tennō finally died in late July 1912, the Kaiser’s younger brother, Prince Heinrich, was assigned as a special envoy to attend the funeral in Tokyo in September of that year. This gesture was regarded as a particularly friendly act in Japan, but it did not produce any political consequences.<sup>5</sup>

With the escalation of international tensions, a new opportunity for a rapprochement with Japan seemed to be within reach. Again, it was the Kaiser who in September 1912 took the initiative and suggested a military alliance with Japan, an idea that, however, was immediately rejected by

the Foreign Office (GP 32, 12026 and 12030; Stingl 1978: 759). When of all people Wilhelm II launched such a project, it must not be confused with a newly won sympathy of the Kaiser towards Japan, but rather should be considered a reflection of the extent of his disappointment towards Russia. The deaths of Prince Katsura in 1913 and Aoki Shūzō in early 1914 ended all speculations concerning the repair of Japanese–German relations before World War I. With them the last of the ‘pro-German group’ of Meiji politicians who were considered indispensable guarantors for Japanese–German relations had gone from the scene. (GP 32: 481, ft.; GP 39, 15613).

When World War I broke out, Japan issued Germany an ultimatum to hand over Kiao-Chow and, having received no reply, opened hostilities against the German leasehold. Germany’s colonial stronghold in China was taken after heavy fighting in autumn 1914. Thousands of German and Austrian soldiers were brought to Japanese prison camps from where the last ones were released as late as 1920. Japan’s entry into the war was not the consequence of deteriorated relations with Germany or of unresolved issues though. Much more serious conflicts existed between Japan and the other powers, such as the problems regarding immigration and the China market with the USA. Nor can it be explained by a clear decision in favour of Britain; it was simply a decision in favour of Japanese expansion on the Asian mainland. Throughout the war, the German government attempted to come to an understanding with Japan, but the ‘illusion of a separate peace’ was entirely shattered by the Japanese (Hayashima 1982).

Before 1914, there existed several obstacles against close relations with Japan on the German side. First of all, there was the impetuosity of the Kaiser and his ambivalent attitude towards Japan and the Japanese. While he favoured individual Japanese, his condemnation of Japan’s rise to great power status as expressed through the ‘Yellow Peril’ propaganda remained intact throughout his life, even in his Dutch exile after 1918. The major stumbling block, which prevented an improvement of Japanese–German relations, was, however, Germany’s inability to acknowledge Japan as an equal player in international politics, even if the forms of diplomatic proprieties were observed. The mentality of the German ruling elite was shaped by a benevolent complacency as a result of the former teacher–pupil relationship, which would concede to Japan only a subordinate role in diplomatic relations. Needless to say, the Japan policy of Wilhelmine Germany contained numerous tactical defects. Nevertheless, even a more skilful performance could not have prevented the collapse of Germany’s position in East Asia in World War I, because a shift in Germany’s attitude towards Japan would have required concessions in its China policy, which was hardly conceivable. It was China, i.e. the prospects of the Chinese market, that for a long time to come almost exclusively held Germany’s attention in East Asia. Germany’s policy towards Japan always mirrored the actual state of its China policy. To

lament ‘lost opportunities’ before World War I is misleading, because they never materialized.

Comparing the world maps of 1914 and 1919 clearly shows to what extent Germany’s international role had changed. The lost war turned the former great power into a largely demilitarized country, which had not only lost all its colonies, but also considerable parts of its territory in Europe. Millions of native Germans were thus forced to live outside their homeland. Dreams of establishing Germany as a – or even ‘the’ – world power had ended in revolution and the overthrow of the monarchy. Nevertheless, the old elites managed to keep their positions in diplomacy, the industry and the small *Reichswehr*, while only few Germans really believed in democracy. Furthermore, the Weimar Republic was burdened with high war indemnities and the notorious ‘war-guilt’ paragraph of the Versailles Treaty (§ 231), which put all the blame for unleashing the war on Germany. This verdict sharply contradicted the German self-perception of a pre-war ‘encirclement’, according to which the war had been fought to defend the country against a ring of enemies. All this meant that the nation was united in its urgent desire to revise the stipulations of the peace treaty.

While Japan’s seizure of Kiao-Chow had incensed Germans at the beginning of World War I, by its end this was little more than a distant (if unpleasant) memory. Japan’s favourable treatment of German prisoners of war meant that the military confrontation of 1914 had not left too much ill feeling between the two nations. Within one generation since the Triple Intervention of 1895, the two countries’ international standing had dramatically changed in favour of Japan. Until the Nazis turned the ‘Third Reich’ into a great power by breaking national and international law as well as moral codes, Germany was politically and militarily too weak to attract Tokyo’s interest. For that very reason, diplomatic relations, which were resumed in March 1920, remained low-key for the following years.

Yet, initiatives by individual academics, artists, businessmen or military officers led to a rapid renewal of contacts between related circles in both countries. In this respect, private associations like the Japanese–German Society (*Nichi–Doku Kyōkai*), the German–Japanese Society (*Deutsch–Japanische Gesellschaft*) and the German East Asiatic Society (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, OAG*) offered plenty of opportunities for Germans and Japanese to meet and thus played an important role during the early stages of bilateral rapprochement after World War I.

Among the first areas in which contacts were re-established was the military sector. As a result of striking changes in military technology during 1914–18, the Japanese army had lost its edge. After World War I, in fields such as aviation, submarines, tanks, etc., Japan lagged dramatically behind. Therefore, the army as well as the navy were looking for advanced technology. The weaponry that Japan had received as spoils of war